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Editorial: Budget squeeze falls unfairly on state's higher education

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget calls for 10 percent cuts in spending for higher education in a year during which one of the largest classes in California history graduates from high school. That is not just bad timing; it is bad policy. It will deny entrance to college for thousands of students, prolong college for thousands of others, and likely lead to increased fees for all four-year college students.

California needs the steady flow of an educated workforce to thrive. Cutting money for two- and four-year colleges next year would be a step backward that would affect more than just the entering freshman class. Legislators must do whatever it takes - making hard choices, eliminating tax loopholes or increasing some taxes - to reverse it.

The three branches of higher education - University of California, California State University and the California Community Colleges system - will get \$1.1 billion less next year for campuses that are already underfunded and overcrowded. UC and CSU systems will have more leeway in choosing their poison, but they may end up raising fees higher than the increases already contemplated (7.4 percent for UC, 10 percent for CSU).

Schwarzenegger's budget also doesn't acknowledge the extra burden that uniform cuts will create for the state's 72 community colleges. It's clear that students turned away from the four-year schools will descend on the community colleges.

Last week signaled the first sign of trouble.

CSU Chancellor Charles Reed moved up the deadline for applying for the fall semester at San Jose State University and most of the 23 campuses from August to Feb. 1 and March 1 for the rest. And he pushed up the date for applying to transfer into the CSU system to April.

Doing so sent a clear message to the public and legislators about the impact of the budget cuts. But it will also create panic for students and a mess for community colleges, which will have to scramble to get transfer records together in time.

In making the cuts, Schwarzenegger is reneging on the five-year compact he signed with the UC and CSU systems in 2004, in which he agreed to fund an average 2.5 percent annual enrollment increase. His no-growth budget will deny 10,000 students a chance to go to CSU - hence, Reed's order for an early deadline to shrink the applicant pool. Based on the past, about 90 percent of seniors have already sent in their applications. Those who haven't are mostly students from low-income families who attend high schools short of counselors.

The local impact is hard to predict. But San Jose State's 32,000 students comprise about 7 percent of the CSU student body. That translates roughly to about 700 freshmen and transfer students - many from Silicon Valley - who will be denied a chance to attend San Jose State next year.

The bulk of these students will turn to community colleges, and the governor should have diverted more money their way. After all, community colleges can provide a good education at a lot less cost to the state (\$8,000 per CSU student in funding vs. \$5,000 for a community college student). Instead, Schwarzenegger would slash Proposition 98 funding for community colleges by \$483 million, giving them money for only a 1 percent increase in enrollment, instead of the 3 percent minimum they need, and denying a 4.94 percent cost-of-living increase the campuses would be entitled to.

At some campuses, some courses will be cut and some part-time instructors let go (apparently not at Foothill-De Anza, which has a large enough reserve to avoid layoffs). But at all campuses, waiting lists for core courses will grow.

Studies have found that students who are forced to drag out their degrees are more likely to give up. The sum of these personal tragedies would be a setback for California's economic future.